

Native Hawaiian Uses Around Wai ‘Opae Tide Pools

Kapoho, Hawaii

Wai ‘Opae tide pools are situated in the ahupua’a of ‘Ahalanui in the Puna district of Hawai’i Island. Commander Charles Wilkes documented what the landscape looked like and the practices of the natives around Kapoho in the mid nineteenth century:

“...that the land was under good cultivation, in kalo (taro), u’ala (sweet potatoes), ko (sugar cane) and a great variety of fruits and vegetables although there was very little land to be cultivated in Kapoho; The view from the guides house was quite pretty, the eye passing over well cultivated fields to the ocean, whose roar could be distinctly heard...”

He also indicated there were many cone craters in the area of Kapoho. The natives had used some of them as “slides”, a recreational sport similar to sledding, and the sleds were called kolua. Based on the accounts of William Ellis, the population in the early nineteenth century in the Puna district that lived near the shore was about 5,000. Puna had the smallest population of the six districts on Hawai’i Island.

Puna was well known for its dried fish from an account of William Ellis in 1823:

“...this area cures large quantities as an article of commerce, which they exchanged with the vegetable production from Hilo and Hamakua. “

Chester S. Lyman traveled around Kapoho and Waiapele (Kapoho Crater) and observed the following:

“...we passed over a rough and naked lava flow, doubtless comparatively recent. Just before arriving at our stopping we came to a small pool of brackish water in the lava, warmed by heat from below – Temp. 83 degrees-

Enjoyed a fine bath. The water 2 or 3 feet deep, and full of minute red fishes from ¼ to ½ inch in length. [Lymans. Book III: 7]"

Bordering Kapoho on the Ka'u side is the land of Puala'a. A native Hawaiian of this area was interviewed February 29, 1876, named D.A Alapi K. Sworn, and said:

"...Puala'a is bounded makai by the sea and had ancient fishing rights extended to the sea..."

A point at shore called Pohakupala is the boundary between these two lands.

Another informant named Owiholu K. Sworn stated on June 2, 1873 [Vol. A:177-178] that:

"...He is a kamaaina of the land and knows the boundaries...Along Kapoho to Punanaio tall *ohia* trees and *kipuka pali* [an open area of *pili* grass growth], an old cultivating ground are at Punanaio..."

No information was found that documented traditional Native Hawaiian uses of the Wai 'Opae tide pools. Wai 'Opae might have not been the name that the natives used for this area. However, prior to the 1975 Kalapana earthquake, that caused widespread subsidence along the Puna coast, the tide pools were much shallower and generally too shallow for coral to live. In fact, the sunken lava bench that is now dotted with the deeper tide pools was largely vegetated out to what is now the reef crest where the ocean waves break.

Prepared by Ms. Pua Medeiros, University of Hawaii at Hilo: Pacific Internship Programs for Exploring Science, August 2007.